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NANCY AND HER REFUGEES

BY MARY HUMPHREY

NANCY, this lovely city of Lorraine, very old and royal and beautiful!

Her hilly streets are narrow and short, opening at either end into a beautiful *place*, with a statue or fountain to remind you that some noble duke loved that spot. The knockers on the carved wooden doors, the grills of garden gates, the exquisite design of iron balconies, the elaborate sculpture of the triumphal arches, the grinning gargoyles on the bishop's palace, are here because René II in 1477 and Stanislas in 1750 loved this city, and ever since, people have delighted in it. The thought that it may all be destroyed makes you want to linger, to touch again the quaint little figures in a gate Gringoire must have peered through, to read the inscriptions on the black marble sarcophagi of the royal house of Lorraine, to say a prayer before the tiny shrine on the corner of the rue de Cheval Blanc, so old the weather has stained it rich brown and worn the features of the sainte into empty sweet flatness. For Nancy is not only very old and full of history, beautiful with the best of sixteenth and seventeenth century art. It is one of the best built cities in all France, the pride of Lorraine, the envy of the enemy.

Now the war is coming close to Nancy, just as it came close and closer to our village till we were ordered to leave our hospital. The order has gone forth—the several thousand refugees who have been living in the barracks since the first hours of the war, the frail, the young, the old, all the charges of the city, are to be sent away. This last sacrifice must be made. They must pack a few bundles and march out of the buildings that have stood for home, to go in the bitter cold and fog wherever the paternal government shall decide. And the préfet, M. Mirman, one of the great souls of France, is determined that they shall keep the spirit of

Lorraine, that they shall carry with them the lares and penates of her shrine.

There is something very impressive and glorious about the spirit of Nancy's children—no word of complaint, no outbursts, just submission. It makes you feel how young America is in the discipline of war. How our people would rebel and call public meetings of protest against the mayor's decision! Not so these loyal citizens. If France can be saved only by sacrificing this lovely Lorraine, then like a beautiful martyr they offer her, all they have. These few days have taught me the holy nature of the war, that love of country means more than family, than individual, than life itself. When a people rise up and offer what the people hold dearest, the home, it makes life take on a new meaning.

Our unit had offered to help at the prefecture, and my work was making out the cards after the permits to leave the city had been issued. The head of the family is listed first, sometimes it is only a fifteen-year-old boy, and his address in Nancy, or in one of the outlying towns whose people have been moving rapidly because of the imminent danger. Then come the names of the wife and all the children, often an old grandparent, more often still some little orphan, a refugee from the first days of the war. Lastly the destination: all France has offered hospitality—tiny villages so small I must write via town after town, the Pyrenees, the coast cities, hamlets high in the Vosges, fair Normandy, bleak Brittany, farms and great centres of trade like Lyons and Bordeaux. The cards are directed some to parents, to sons, to friends, to holy institutions, others just address the prefecture. The system of this paternal democracy, with its records of every citizen, stands in good stead now when you wonder what is to prevent whole families from being lost in oblivion.

Each day in the office many, many more people are in line waiting for their papers—merchants and humble peasant folk, like a movie film of the passing of a city. We notice a great change in the streets. Windows are tight sealed, with heavy iron shutters. We pass slow-moving carts heaped high with all the household goods that stand for comfortable homes; or a small handcart pulled by an old man, with the wife pushing behind, doggedly keeping her eyes on the ground. The tears that fall so silently from weary old eyes tell more than words of what this really means. Women

give up husband and son and suffer heroically, but after all in the glory and the loss they have something left, for the dead of French women today are like jewels in a crown. But to give up home, the background of the picture of life, is not that the supreme sacrifice of all?

Every one is helping in the evacuation—the camions of the French army, the British, the Canadians, and our Red Cross. People are leaving at the rate of two thousand a day. All over town are great posters saying that trains A, B, C will leave at certain hours. We go to the station to watch the departure of groups of refugees, the humble, the sad flotsam and jetsam washed in here by the cruel waves of war, the precious children of M. Mirman. They come from the same tiny village where their fathers lived and died; they share the same memories of bombardment, loss and exile; for three years they have been sorry pensioners of Nancy, and now if they must leave Lorraine they want to go with their own.

It makes you think of the children of Israel. Oh, I wish I were Rembrandt's spirit reincarnate, for only his hand can paint the faces of the gentle aged folk. I wish I were Hugo, for only he can make you know these heroic Spartan souls. And I would be Balzac, to give you the *comédie humaine* that we are witnessing.

The camions from the barracks are unloading. Great strong-armed poilus lift out the children. Mothers deposit sleeping infants in the arms of these blue-eyed friends. Then they climb down, laughing, setting their fantastic hats aright, clutching the kiddies who stare at us and the great crowd. Energetic old grandmothers hunch themselves and shake out their full skirts, for all the world like chickens after a shower.

Every person has a kitbag made of brand new gunny sacking tightly sewed. They wear them on the hip or back, slung by straps. And those rich enough have a linen carry-all embroidered in cherries or flowers. Nearly every one clutches a large umbrella by its loose middle, heads of families often have three or four. Here and there is a thoughtful person with a great loaf of bread and bottle of wine.

At last the signal is given. With much chattering and excitement they begin to file through the gates. The Government is paying all expenses, so they have only one form of permission—the ones we have been working on. I look about for some whose names are so familiar, wondering if this big

family may not be one I have recorded. That soapy, little, round-cheeked René, perhaps, went only this morning into the *place* to say goodbye to René, duc de Lorraine, roi de Jerusalem, Aragon et Sicile. How proudly his plumes fly as he holds aloft his spear and his fiery steed stands at attention! René has doubtless played at his feet all his short life and now is leaving him, to who knows what fate? And this may be my Jeanne, did she stop to say *au revoir* to Jeanne d'Arc on her horse in the little square where she so zealously lights anew the spirit of France in the hearts of all who pass?

We move about among the people. Here is a family greeting their neighbors, kisses on both cheeks for every member of the party. Do you think they are sad? No, it is those left behind who wipe their eyes. The departing ones are full of merriment and fun, chattering like magpies and hurrying after the crowd as though they feared to be lost. The French are not great travelers, you know, and this is a great experience, a real setting forth to see the world.

A motor draws up and the préfet gets out, the silver embroidery on his cap sparkling in the sun. He has a white beard and bright eyes, and wears a cape that falls nearly to his knees. His daughters follow with great gallon cans of coffee. He is always on hand to serve his poor people; anything but the sort of autocrat who sits in an office and signs documents, he and his family never stop their personal service.

Hovering around are angelic sisters in long full skirts and tight little bodices with shoulder yokes that give them a Hans Memling look. In that crowd their white-lined head-dresses are not more startling than their bloodless faces from which dark eyes look out rather hopelessly. We offer to help and are graciously welcomed, the magic words, "*Croix rouge américaine*," are passports enough.

A line of camions drives up slowly—the Old Ladies' Home, in exile. Oh, if I could only make you see it! And don't think it is too bitter, too heartbreaking. For the heroism, the noble spirit in which Nancy's children are going lifts the whole episode on to a plane above pity or regret. And so much humor is manifest, I laugh to myself while I struggle to keep back the tears. For here is all the frailty of my poor weak sex, the little vanities, the niceties of class distinction, the selfishness, the complainings of put-upon individuals, the sly surreptitious greediness of some, and the

angelic sweetness, the patience, the long-suffering, self-abnegation and gratitude of humble hearts. It has lifted me up out of all fear and self-thought for months to come.

They are very old, these French bourgeoisie, at sixty-five or seventy, far older than our own dear people. Their shoulders are bowed, their backs doubled over, their gnarled hands like little claws. Oh, the hundreds of bright eyes, dim eyes, blind eyes and dull! The faces brown as berries, the crackly skins like old parchment, the hard red cheeks like granite, chiseled into a million wrinkles by the half century's passage!

They cackle and laugh at each other. Every little old lady reaches first for her bonnet, such little bonnets of such rusty black they positively gritted. Some have the exclusive smell of whilom aristocracy, with two thin ostrich tips askew, others have ornaments of beads or flowers of knitted wool. Nearly every woman wears a cape of faded black velvet or heavy cloth, as the previous state might warrant. The velvet capes herd together at first; later, all this caste is laid aside.

A chair is handed up for a crumpling little brown doll of a woman. The poilus lift her out and set her up on her feet with a little jerk. The jar evidently started her works, her eyes fly open, her little head turns from side to side and her hands begin to flutter. I catch her eye—such a winsome smile, such a saucy wry mouth as she makes! “Oh, la la, la la!” she laughs as I take hold of her arm. “*Mon dieu, mon dieu!*” she clings to me as I reach for her heavy gunny sack and great umbrella.

A fine official marches up and down. The old ladies look at him in awe.

“St. Julien, St. Julien,” he calls.

A tremor runs down the line. They all say “La, la!” when the crowd sways forward or back. Steadily, slowly, painfully, we march through the gates. You recall what formalities usually have to be endured to achieve the triumph of being on a train platform in France? We do it en masse. There is the long row of cars that is to carry us so far across this fair France.

Third-class compartments swing open their doors to us. But what a step up even for young and immodest legs, and for these, how can it be done? St. Julien is separated from another institution. Greedy old men are shooed off from this feminine train. We begin stowing them away. Those

whose legs are spry and hands nimble crowd in ahead. Grudgingly they remove their kitbags from the seats to make way for the less fortunate. All our efforts to dislodge one woman from her chosen place near the door are unavailing and we have to tuck a feeble little octogenarian into the far corner by the window. My first love I have boosted to the step and put into a comfortable place. She blesses me and calls me "*ma belle*". I wish I could adopt her, the cheery merry soul that laughs up out of such faded eyes, in the midst of this calamity.

We are very busy. One of us guides a trembling foot, another stands inside the car to pull, while "*la grande soeur*", as the nuns call our strongest nurse, puts her shoulder under them and hoists them up, fairly catapulting them into place. As soon as they are settled they begin to munch thick black bread. We dodge egg shells as we hurry to the car ahead. The feasting has started!

One fussy, round, little budget of a woman I stop as she is trotting along so independently and take from her grudging hands the inevitable impedimenta. She discriminates for some minutes till she finds a compartment where she likes the company. At last she is satisfied. I put her luggage in and turn to boost her. She begins fumbling in her skirts. Up goes the black woolen one. There is a gray flannel with two large pockets on the hips. She searches carefully through each. Up goes the gray and there is a dark blue flannel petticoat. Two pockets there do not reveal what she is after. Up goes the blue. A red and black check of heavy flannel. Two more pockets. Then the restoration of order. Finally she clucks. I put forth my best efforts. As I slide her into the car she catches my hand and my fingers close over something—two copper sous—I am tipped at last!

Now all our lively, chipper ones are in and here comes the long line of bed cases. Soldiers carry them on stretchers. They are dressed for the long journey in scarves and bonnets, with shawls and robes about them. They are smiling and excited over the novelty. Many perhaps never hoped to leave their beds and here they are going a-traveling, and none the worse for it. First-class cars for these, where they are stretched full length to be as comfortable as thought can make them.

From all the group one stands out, an alabaster face under white, white hair, with faded blue eyes and a smile

flitting about the mouth, her hands folded, never moving. She is dressed in soft lavender and covered with a snowy blanket. We all go to her compartment, for it is like a shrine the moment she is placed there. I touch her hands and peace seems to flow from her. She smiles up at me and suddenly I feel all the beauty and strength of spirit that time and war can never down, shining out through that frail, alabaster lamp of a broken body.

We are too occupied to notice that M. Mirman has come to our train. I turn from a shriveled little invalid to find him near me. He shakes hands with a look on his face I shall not soon forget. I watch him carrying in his arms a bed-ridden woman like a child—his child she truly is—and tenderly placing her on the long seat of the car.

Such a wonderful opportunity as we have had to share in this work, when Nancy sends away her children, a work that is the greater because it comes suddenly and out of a terrible need! Any former casual Paris impression of a people weak or frivolous has been swept away by these patient, brave-hearted folk, whose one ideal of France is so all-possessing. Their love for her is like a white flame that is burning itself to ashes, coupled with an undying devotion to all that this war is trying to right, the only things worth struggling for. There is so much that is finer and higher than our belongings—my little old lady taught me that. Nancy's sending away her children has given me an unshakable faith in the right, if only we will wait.

MARY HUMPHREY.